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Loss, History and Melancholia in Contemporary Latin American Cinema

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Death is an unquestionable part of our lives, a matter of time, the only thing we know for certain. The death of your own child, however, is a matter provoking disbelief, perhaps madness. Mothers raise questions. When they go unanswered, rage takes over reasoning. While some family narratives seek resolution, or at least an explanation for the loss experienced by all the members, others get stuck on endless dwelling, trapped in the grief that changes the realities of their life. How do cultures, however, account for the deaths of their children? How does Latin American film address such loss, mourning and rage?

New challenges facing Latin American representations of trauma have been created by historical legacies such as borders, migration, totalitarian regimes and globalization. I invite readers to look more specifically for the connections between loss and melancholia in recent Latin American film as these connections challenge cultural assumptions regarding historical discourse and its representation. These films suggest that personal loss, placed in a collective history, can be transformed into a site for reconstructing a community able to transcend historical trauma.

In the light of these debates, how do loss and melancholia in recent Latin American film bring historical specificity to these new forms of representation? This cinema seems to suggest the existence of two reactions to such historical legacies: a patriarchal and pathological past-bound form of melancholia that prolongs the entrapment of trauma created by the father nation state, and an alternative, more hopeful, present-bound form of melancholia that allows space for a configuration of a new transnational matrifocal consciousness. As an example of the latter I will analyze two films from two representative countries of Latin America: *Camila* (1984, Argentina) and *Santitos* (2000, Mexico). Both films use loss, melancholia and grief as different ways of addressing history and cultural representation.

What do I mean by "melancholia"? "Melancholia" in psychoanalysis designates a pathological, endless grief regarding a trauma or a violent loss. In "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), Freud presents the connecting points of both elements. A loss without closure results in endless mourning, a state of permanent grief, and an attachment to the past that erases the present or any

possibility of a future. It is, then, the inability to resolve those moments of loss from the past, coupled with the lack of resolution, that creates what Freud describes as "melancholia." I will show how Latin American cinema views matrifocal forms of melancholia and its manifestations of oppositional culture as spaces of creativity and representation. This cinema is able to create multiple sites of representation resulting in a body of national cinema that goes beyond individual pathology to recreating a space of community that even goes beyond national boundaries. The creation of a transnational matrifocal consciousness in Latin American film seeks a link between personal loss, melancholia, and the trauma of historical legacies left by totalitarian regimes, borders, migration and globalization.

We need only to recall María Luisa Bemberg's *Camila* to understand the considerable influence loss and trauma have had on the Latin American psyche since the era of the totalitarian regimes of the 1970s. In answer to the culture of terror created in Argentina from 1973-1982, *Camila* (released in 1984) engages with the loss of thousands of people killed and tortured during one of the most repressive periods in Latin American history. María Luisa Bemberg creates a haunting connection between the nineteenth century's case of Camila O'Gorman, her execution, and the loss of life inflicted by Argentina's war on terror and subversion during the 1970s. Using Juan Manuel Rosas' regime as an historical setting, and the love between Camila O'Gorman and a young Jesuit priest in 1847 as plot, *Camila* offers the most haunting state of loss and erasure:

Camila es una película histórica. Usa la Historia, un hecho histórico de la Argentina de 1847, como pre-texto para su representación cinematográfica. Una película histórica (y/o su discurso) es siempre un signo, a veces directo pero más a menudo figurativo con respecto a la Historia a la que se refiere. Aun cuando los hechos históricos que describe se presentan tal y como ocurrieron, pueden adquirir un significado dentro del contexto del discurso fílmico que difiere completamente del que tuvieron en la Historia. (Curry 11)

[*Camila* is a period film. It uses history, namely, an historical fact of 1847 Argentina, as a pretext for its cinematic portrayal. A period film (and/or its discourse) is always a sign, at times direct but more often figurative, with respect to the history to which it refers. Even though the historical facts that it describes are presented as they actually occurred, such facts can acquire a meaning within the context of the cinematic discourse that differs completely from that which they had in that history.]

Camila portrays a perplexing state of loss and mourning that permeates Latin American history. The film is a historical reinterpretation of forces at the roots of the official discourse of the regime, a condemnation of the repression itself,

and a reflection of the lack of closure of its citizens. This place of endless dwelling is associated in the film with the Latin American cultural and political alliance between church, nation, and family created since the nineteenth century, the time of the creation of a "father" nation state. María Luisa Bemberg establishes a powerful symbol in *Camila* through the all-pervasive image of the father. The result is a monumental historical vacuum framed by endless grief, madness, and (pathological) melancholia. Love and motherhood in the film, on the other hand, remind the audience of the only source of resistance during the bloodiest years of the dictatorship: the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and their daily protest for the thousands of "desaparecidos." In the film, mothers together recreate the emptiness left by loss, and this commonality becomes one of the main ways of collapsing personal grief with the social. The scenes of oppositional culture created by the film's matrifocal consciousness become for the audience a reminder of the insurgency created by the Madres against Argentina's "dirty war" and its military junta. In this regard, Joan Copjec states:

Someone dies and leaves behind his place, which outlives him and is unfillable by anyone else. This idea constructs a specific notion of the social, wherein it is conceived to consist not only of particular individuals and their relations to each other, but also as a relation to these unoccupiable places. The social is composed, then, not just of those things that will pass, but also of relations to empty places that will not. (23)

Camila's attention to a matrifocal notion of history allows the audience to understand a public resistance generated through careful attention paid to the grief created by loss. This form of hopeful melancholia is set by the invitation to read the historical Camila O'Gorman as one of the "disappeared," and also as one of the many wives, daughters, and mothers present in the demonstrations at the Plaza de Mayo. In fact, in the film María Luisa Bemberg overwrites the notion of the unforgiving "father" at the roots of the national with the hopeful and present symbol of the loving "Madres."

Furthermore, *Camila* refuses to suggest these places are past, and therefore absent, objects of mourning. The film relates the empty places left by loss (in the past) as the present fabric of the social allowing for a creative reformulation of grief.

The move toward a present-bound form of melancholia is also stressed in Alejandro Springall's Mexican-U. S. production of *Santitos*. But to understand María Amparo Escandón's script, her use of loss and melancholia in *Santitos*, the way they affect Latin American cultural studies, and their relationships to cultural representation, we must place this work in a historical context. This is especially pertinent to contemporary Latin American culture since some of the most influential intellectuals of the 1950s will use the aesthetics of a past-

bound melancholia to make the readers aware of the political and cultural losses implied by the spread of modernity. We need only recall Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) to understand the considerable influence loss and melancholia have had on Latin American historical and cultural representation. Loss and the consequences of mourning explain to a great degree what Rulfo and Paz achieved at the peak of the Latin American modernist period.

The search for Comala (the mythical city of Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*) becomes the archetype for a state of perpetual loss that permeates the Mexican and the Latin American sense of self. This place, usually associated with the Mexican cultural and political state of affairs of the 1950s, in many ways anticipates Moreiras' concerns regarding the general epistemology of representation and his reflections on melancholia and historical specificity (2). Rulfo's dead world of Comala challenges not only the value of oppositional culture and the possibilities of historical representation, given the limitations of the Latin American signifier, but also the demise of the Revolution itself given its co-option by the political and economic forces at work since the 1950s. The process of memorialization and the cultural agency of the modernist aesthetic taken by this writer have been challenged by Neil Larsen's *Modernism and Hegemony: A Materialist Critique of Aesthetic Agencies*. He argues that Rulfo's mode of representation, for example, is an ideological and (negative) essentialist statement on the identity of Mexican culture. The result is a past-bound form of melancholia where the culture that emerges from this vacuum, according to Larsen, "in itself becomes the naturalizing and dehistoricizing containment of what is otherwise potentially an emergence of a particular counterrationality directly opposed to that of the absent state mediation" (64).

This past-bound form of melancholia was explored in Octavio Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude* five years earlier, with its his patriarchal vision of "solitude" for the Mexican self. Paz emphasizes this fixation on loss and the infinite solitude that emanates from this state of the culture. In fact, Paz's state of melancholia, as the archetypal representation of the Mexican self, implies not only a condemnation of the Revolution itself but the exhaustion of its signs of representation. He also underlines the impossibility ("solitude" and the labyrinth being archetypes of a culture trapped in endless mourning) of coming to closure with the loss of the "father state" after the failure of the revolutionary impulse of the 1920s. And finally, for Paz, it is the archetype of La Malinche (the "mother" of all mestizos) that articulates the Mexican's sense of (pathological) melancholia and the loss of culture. Paz's construction of the archetype of La Malinche as linked to the "loss" of the original indigenous Mexico creates a vision of the feminine radically antithetical to the discourse of Mexi-

can nationalism. As his discourse positions the original "mother" of all Mexicans at the roots of betrayal and loss, the paradigm of nation state, identity and creativity shifts towards a patriarchal and a pathological past-bound sense of melancholia.

What does it mean, then, to enter the discourse of loss, mourning and melancholia from a matrifocal perspective during the 1990s? María Amparo Escandón's script for the film *Santitos* raises the question in new and creative ways.

In the film, a young widow, Esperanza, stares death in the face, walking the fine line between loss and madness, healing and trauma. This is the story: Esperanza Díaz has just lost her twelve-year-old daughter to an unexplained virus. The last time she saw her, Blanca was in the hospital to have her tonsils removed. Suddenly she is reported dead. As the author has explained, this is the main question of the film: "What if I was told my daughter had died and I wasn't able to confirm her death? My immediate reaction would be to deny it. To prove them wrong I would do what anyone else would in this case: anything and everything. Call on otherworldly forces for guidance? Sure. Set out to find her who knows where in the world? Of course. Become a prostitute? You bet. And in the process of looking for her, I'd most likely find myself" ("Santitos").

Esperanza's first reaction regarding her daughter's death can be applied to Melanie Klein's definition of melancholia as the "real loss of a real object, or some similar situation having the same significance, [which] results in the object becoming installed within the ego. Owing, however, to an excess of cannibalistic impulses in the subject, this introjection miscarries and the consequence is illness" (263). But what follows gives the film an unlikely twist: The night of the funeral Esperanza experiences a vision from San Judas Tadeo, patron saint of desperate cases. Speaking through his image on the oven window, he tells her that her daughter is not dead. Then, Esperanza sets off with her box of saints to look for her daughter. This journey takes her from her native town of Veracruz to Tijuana, then to the Mexican side of Los Angeles and finally back home again.

Esperanza's border crossings and her practices as a female sleuth subvert the symbolic nature assigned to women (La Malinche as the "mother-whore" responsible for the loss of the original México) within Mexican history and Catholic traditional culture. Escandón uses humor to reverse the discourse imposed on the feminine; thus Esperanza goes in and out of these roles, never letting any of them touch her deepest search for a new self. As humor dissolves the false boundaries of the paradigm, it also shows the repressive na-

ture of the Mexican nationalist discourse imposed on the feminine. Esther Sanchez-Pardo in *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia* states that "when this story of loss requires death, the writing must pass through the self of the witness who remains and holds a stubborn attachment to reference . . . Modernist cultures of the death drive are inseparable from bearing witness to this devastation: not forgotten, but memorialized" (393). This applies to *Santitos* since the film not only articulates the complexities of loss, melancholia and mourning but also links these elements to create new forms of representation for the most recent Latin American cinema. *Santitos* uses both faith and rage, moving between insight and madness, as ways of disrupting the pathological melancholia affecting Esperanza. Surprisingly, these disruptions are performed through a sort of "public theology" with heavy roots in the popular — apparitions, saints, miracles and other signs of Mexican Catholic spirituality. But Escandón uses these miracles to move into the ethical realm and beyond the traditional aesthetics of Magical Realism.

Escandón's new sense of representation emerges from a discourse of Mexican identity that gives meaning to the lives of people in the margins, and her insights are born out of the complexities of the dual consciousness of the Border and an all embracing "mother" — the Virgin of Guadalupe. In fact, she redefines Paz's notion of the national absent "father" (Hernán Cortés) and the traitor whore-mother (La Malinche) with the Virgin of Guadalupe as the transnational symbol of the "mother" of all Mexicans.

Max Stackhouse defines public theology as that which "generates a faithful worldview, recovers and recasts certain pertinent historic themes in the history of theology that bear on globalization, and challenges any trends in theology that sees all normative claims as privileged to specific gender, ethnic, social, or convictional groups" (5). *Santitos* generates this public theology through the constant investigation of Esperanza's loss and the exploration of those places in-between that refuse easy solutions. During her long trip to the U. S., the box where she keeps her saints becomes the connection with the memory of her daughter. In fact this presence is so vivid, in the novel it is described like a being:

En el otro brazo llevaba una caja de cartón voluminosa y difícil de cargar. En un costado había escrito con marcador: "Frágil. Santos." La apretaba contra su pecho igual que si se tratara de un bebé. Su contenido resonaba dentro como si fuera un ser vivo que trataba de escapar (78).

["In the other arm she carried a voluminous carton box that was difficult to carry. In one of the corners she had written with a marker: 'Fragile. Saints.' She held on to it against her chest like it was a baby. The insides of the box sounded as if there was a living person trying to escape. "]

Esperanza's box of saints "embodies" these relations to empty places in the historical present of the "illegal" immigrants and becomes a creative force as it extends the way mourning becomes interwoven with other people's losses and border crossings. It is not surprising that through her loss Esperanza becomes a witness for those undocumented and exploited by the border. Her box of saints is simultaneously a reminder of her personal loss and the tool that brings her closer to the prostitutes, abandoned children, wrestlers, and a large representation of the marginalized on both sides of the border. As she expands her consciousness into the greater cultural community of Mexico and the U. S. Southwest, a space emerges that helps bring a sense of interconnectedness and history among Mexicans and Chicanos living in the United States. With each character, and with each tale told from this subaltern community, Esperanza gains new insights into the dynamics of the relationship between Chicano and Mexican life in the Southwest. In fact as Esperanza's search takes her to Tijuana, she also discovers the experience of crossing illegally. Referring to the saint of the undocumented border crossers, the narrator notices how he was "a poor disgrace, just like us. We need more saints here than in other parts" (132).

On those occasions loss is taken beyond the pathology of melancholia as the signifier of representation, and Esperanza's identity expands into a border identity, a discovery of a "larger" community which implies the Mexican on both sides of the border. Furthermore, the emancipatory values of this transnational consciousness theorize a new space that creates a link between personal loss, grief, melancholia, and the trauma of historical legacies, such as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, migration, and the creation of an artificial border. Referring to the latter and the importance of the Mexican-American war in the industrial development of the U. S., Rodolfo Acuña states that "as a result of the Texas War and the Anglo-American aggressions of 1845-1848, the occupation of conquered territory began. In material terms, in exchange for 12,000 lives and more than \$100 million, the United States acquired a colony two and a half times as large as France, containing rich farmlands and natural resources such as gold, silver, zinc, copper, oil, and uranium, which would make possible its unprecedented industrial boom" (20).

By placing Esperanza's personal loss in a collective history of loss, the film challenges cultural assumptions regarding not only official historical discourse and its representation but, with it, Esperanza's role as a woman and mother. Esperanza escapes the isolation of her life, and the quest for the truth opens up her view of the world. Against a vision of the world comprised by passivity and submission, *Santitas* postulates a vision of Esperanza as a questioning individual and border crosser. In the uncertain border, her loss is transformed

into a new consciousness and space for self-empowerment. This strategy becomes the link with the practices by which loss is "materialized in the social and the cultural realms and in the political and the aesthetic domains" (Eng 5).

Within this context involving the sociopolitical situation and cultural production on both sides of the border, I should emphasize again Escandón's use of the specific spiritual image that expresses best the space of the "transnational-mother" experience: The Virgin of Guadalupe. In this film, both Mexican and Chicano popular Catholic spirituality are joined by devotion to the Mother. This symbol both deconstructs geographical borders and facilitates the inclusion of a space of consciousness in between cultures. Furthermore, there are intrinsic emancipatory cultural values associated with the deconstruction of the other "mother" of all Mexicans. Escandón replaces the negative connotations of La Malinche, reinforced by past-bound melancholia in the official discourse of nation state, with connotations drawn from a tradition that theorizes border crossings and from a popular religious faith (the Virgin of Guadalupe). Thus Escandón gives the basis for a cultural and spiritual greater community of hope. Escandón not only reverses the logic of patriarchal structure and its pathology of loss, but also offers a spiritual and geographical reconstruction of a "present" Mexican self beyond borders.

It is not by chance that in the film *Esperanza* finds her consciousness looking at the Virgin of Guadalupe painted in one of the murals of East Los Angeles. As her discourse positions the original "mother" of all Mexicans at the roots of healing these suffering from the betrayal of the father nation state, the film shifts towards matrifocal power and a present-bound sense of melancholia. It is, then, in this new understanding of her loss (a climactic moment in the film that seals her moment of consciousness) that *Esperanza* is able to return home.

To loss and mourning *Santitos* responds with a quest that gives new meanings to self-consciousness. Transforming loss into laughter, adventure into spiritual insight, the border crossings become journeys of self-empowerment and redemption, of faith searching for human dignity and truth that naturally gives rise to the connecting features of the greater cultural communities (and a collective history) not divided by borders.

In a new more complex type of heroism, the heroine acts in this film from a sense of motherhood whose faith allows her to witness the downfall of melancholia as pathology. Self-empowerment takes over loss, and a new consciousness emerges at the end. In many ways *Santitos'* radical crossings correspond to Homi Bhabha's "savage hybridity," elucidated by Moreiras as

"the radicalization of the reticent version of cultural hybridity on the basis of its constitutive negativity: it turns a reticent understanding of cultural change into a principle of counterhegemonic praxis, and it places it at the service of the subaltern position in the constitution of the hegemonic system" (296). This is relevant to our initial discussion of the conditions for a new Latin American discourse and the exhaustion of the process of differentiated repetition. This positive reelaboration of melancholia (which could be called a "hopeful melancholia") within contemporary Latin American cinema could become the element that unites a new cultural representation, community and individual self-empowerment. Melancholia as pathology is transformed into a positive form of melancholia that offers hope, community, and growth and builds "a continuous engagement with loss and its remains [that] generates sites for memory and history, for the rewriting of the past as well as the reimagining of the future" (Eng 4).

In *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Leigh Gilmore argues that "placing a personal history of trauma within a collective history compels one to consider that cultural memory, like personal memory, possesses 'recovered' or 'repressed' memories, and also body (or body politic) memories of minoritized trauma like racial and sexual violence" (31-32).

In these films, personal loss, placed in a collective history, is transformed into a space from which one can promote the reconstruction of a community able to transcend the trauma created by the father nation state. I find this particularly interesting, since both films seem to suggest that it is the nation state that legislates a patriarchal and pathological past-bound form of melancholia, as opposed to the hopeful, matrifocal, present-bound melancholia of Camila and Esperanza. The real innovation of these films is the attempt to situate personal loss in a multifaceted way that enables us "to understand the lost object as continually shifting both spatially and temporally, adopting new perspectives and meanings, new social and political consequences, along the way" (Eng 5).

Both films suggest a call for the audience to construct alternative stories about loss, which, in turn, also become matrifocal alternatives to the official history. As a result, they propose in its place, a new space, a new history, represented by a new consciousness. Through this intellectual challenge the audience is allowed to get closer to the truth of the experience of Latin America, to become a participant in this search for self-empowerment, and to recapture the meaning of loss in cinema and its Latin American cultural representations.

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